SCEPTICISM AND REVELATION

H. HARRIS B.D.

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BY

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"Il faut savoir douter où il faut, assurer où il faut et se soumettre où il faut; qui ne fait ainsi n'entend pas la force de la raison."—PASCAL.

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PREFACE.

THE chief aim of the following treatise is to point out the exact position occupied by the Bible in the system of God's dealings with man; a position which appears to me to have been the subject of frequent and serious misunderstanding both amongst impugners and defenders of Revelation.

As introductory to this my main object, I have attempted a brief sketch of the different sources and forms of scepticism, with especial reference to those particular tendencies of it which are peculiarly characteristic of the present age, and which, as I believe them to have arisen, in great measure, out of the misunderstanding just alluded to, so they will be best counteracted by its removal.

If in the course of my argument on behalf of Revelation I should occasionally make concessions which may seem liable to be laid hold of and turned against her, let me, in answer, call attention to the fact, that precisely in the same degree that Revelation presupposes a state of candour

and of freedom from prejudice in those to whom she makes her appeal, so she necessarily, and may we not add purposely, lays herself open to misconstruction and rejection at the hands of the uncandid and prejudiced.

The concluding chapter, entitled "The Future Retrospect," contains the substance of a sermon on 1 Cor. xiii. 9, 10, preached by me before the University of Oxford, in Magdalen College Chapel, on the Festival of St. Mark, 1858.

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CHAPTER I.

SCEPTICISM: ITS SOURCES AND FORMS.

THERE is a scepticism of the head; there is a scepticism of the heart; there is also a scepticism of the head and of the heart combined; and combined it may be in any proportion of the one to the other.

Heart scepticism originates in an instinctive aversion to the contents of the form of belief offered to its acceptance.

Head scepticism originates in the natural tendency of the expanding and reflecting mind to test everything by a standard of its own. It is thus led on to ask question after question respecting the belief in which it has been trained, or which is proposed for its acceptance, and to withdraw or withhold its assent from it, in proportion as it fails to receive what it considers to be satisfactory answers.

(*a.*) In its commonest perhaps, certainly its least justifiable form, scepticism of this latter kind is the result of an exaggerated idea of the amount of wisdom and knowledge placed at the disposal of mankind in general, and appropriated in its own individual case in particular. Whilst revelation, from the variety and abstruseness of her contents, as well as from the immense importance universally attached to them, offers the most inviting of all scenes to a disposition of this

character, for the exercise and display of its ingenuity; besides presenting it with an opportunity, often too tempting to be resisted, of laying claim to the performance of a most heroic act of self-devotion in the sacrifice of a belief and hope (never sufficiently realized to be appreciated) to the idol of self-conceit, faintly disguised under the semblance of truth.

(*b.*) It may be also the result of the application of that innate spirit of curiosity which occupies itself alike with everything, in turn, that comes within its reach, to the particular department of revelation as one, and only one, amongst the many legitimate subjects of its operation, without any regard to the peculiar degree of importance with which it is invested, or the particular claim which it has upon its acceptance.

(*c.*) And lastly, in its most justifiable, in some cases highly commendable form, it may be the result of a special desire to satisfy itself of the validity of its religious belief, consequent upon the recognition of its peculiar and paramount importance.

Difficult as is the task of distinguishing between these different forms of scepticism, it is no less dangerous to confound them one with the other. The difficulty proceeds, in great measure, from the same general appearance of doubt in matters of religion being presented by all.

But it also, and in far greater measure, proceeds from the attempts which scepticism of the heart invariably makes at self-justification, by passing itself off under the character of scepticism of the head.

The result of these attempts is almost as invariably the opposite from that which was intended. Instead of elevating its own character it only occasions the depression of the character with which it thus seeks to identify itself to its own lower level. It is now almost always taken for granted in every case of scepticism that it has its main source at least in the heart. Still, difficult as it has thereby become to distinguish between them, these different forms of scepticism require a widely different treatment one from the other.

Heart scepticism can only be met by heart remedies. To treat it with remedies which are appropriate to the head is not only to leave the disease untouched in its source, but still further to aggravate it by the encouragement thus held out to its attempts at deception; it is perhaps to convert what at the outset was a deception intended to be practised on others, into that most hopeless of all cases, deception of self.

Head scepticism, in like manner, must be met fully and fairly on its own ground, by either giving the proper answers to its questions, or at least by convincing it of its folly in demanding them. Simply to persist in ignoring its existence, or what perhaps is still worse, to persist in mistaking it for scepticism of the heart, tends inevitably to provoke it with a sense of the injustice with which it is treated, and at the same time to confirm it in its suspicions that the difficulties which it has raised are incapable of removal. One of the not least productive occasions of confirmed unbelief in the

present day is, it is to be feared, to be found in the injudicious treatment of cases of incipient scepticism of the head.

Those instances—and they are, perhaps, of all the most common—in which scepticism both of the head and of the heart are found combined in the same person, must be met, so far as is possible, by a counter-proportion of each kind of remedy.

It is not within the scope of my present enquiry to enter upon a detailed account of the various symptoms by which each form of scepticism may be discriminated and detected. Indeed, it may be fairly questioned whether any amount of mere theoretical knowledge of this subject would be of much avail for practical purposes. It is chiefly by a close study of the phenomena of human nature, and by personal acquaintance with actual cases of each form of scepticism, and of the various combinations which are entered into between one form and another, that practical success in dealing with such cases is to be hoped for.

At the same time, it will have been labour well bestowed if the observations above made should have the effect of inducing any who feel themselves disquieted with the presence of doubts on the subject of their religious belief, to put the question fully and fairly each to his own conscience, to which of the above-enumerated sources and forms his own case of scepticism is to be referred.

CHAPTER II.

SCEPTICISM: ITS PRESENT TENDENCIES.

EACH age in succession is haunted by the same restless spirit of scepticism, but embodied in a shape which varies with the ever-varying tendencies and circumstances of each.

The following may, I think, be noticed as the most characteristic forms in which it presents itself to us at the present day:—

1. It is not uncommon to meet with a scepticism which professes to confine itself to some particular features or points in the Scripture record, though usually accompanied with a tendency more or less active to insinuate itself by degrees into the whole structure of its belief.

And the particular occasions which have given rise to it under this form, are mainly to be sought for either (*a*) in the progress which, during the course of the present century, has been made in the different branches of physical science; or (*b*) in the development which the same period has also witnessed in the many and various departments of criticism, especially those of philology and history.

By the former (*a*) of these, discoveries are from time to time supposed to be made which point to conclusions at direct variance with the Scripture record. Whilst (*b*) by the application on the part of the latter to Scripture,

of the principles which have been established and applied with signal success to the different branches of human literature, the divine authority at least, if not the genuineness and credibility of a large portion of its inspired contents, have been openly called in question. As regards the relative claims of science and revelation (*a*), we cannot for a moment hesitate to acknowledge,—nay, as Christians we ought to be the first to demand the acknowledgment,—that the volume of creation is traced by the same unerring hand as that to which we ascribe the volume of revelation. Nor can we deny that particular portions of the space occupied by Scripture enter also into the province of one or another of the physical sciences, which have jointly taken upon themselves the office of interpreters to nature; and that through the instrumentality of the latter, every day is witness to some fresh light thrown upon the subject thus held in common between them and Scripture. All, therefore, that we can fairly demand is this,—that the records of both nature and revelation should be each of them fairly perused and interpreted, and both compared together, before arriving at a hasty conclusion that the two are really at variance with each other. When a discrepancy has been fully and fairly established, then will be the proper time to discuss the question how far it affects the authority of Scripture as a divine revelation.

Meanwhile, numerous as are the discoveries which have been made by physical science within the last

few years, we know not how far many conclusions to which they at present point may in turn have to be modified, or even superseded, by discoveries yet to come. And it will be obviously most unfair to require Scripture to accommodate itself to each in turn of the successive theories, which for the time are predominant in the scientific world. We may at least object to the claim of an established discrepancy between revelation and science, till science herself can fairly claim to have both fully deciphered and assigned the final interpretation to her own documents.

Again; even supposing such a process to result in an apparent contradiction between the records of nature and those of revelation, yet we must not be too hasty in assuming the point in question to be determined.

Whatever disclosures in the department of nature are to be found in Scripture, it must be recollected that they are made, not with a view to promote the interests of science, but as incidental and subordinate means to some farther and higher end. For instance, whatever other objections on sceptical grounds may be urged against the fact of the miracle recorded in the 10th chapter of Joshua, yet no one at the present day would think of founding an objection to it on the difference between the terms in which it is there described, and the language of astronomy at the present day. It is indeed most evident, from many sources, that Scripture often contents itself with giving what would be called a subjective account of such phenomena in the

department of nature as come in its way; such an account, that is to say, as might naturally be given by an ordinary person looking at them from the same point of view from which the writer is himself supposed to depict them. Granting, then, for the sake of present argument, that in process of time a contradiction comes to be finally established between some record of nature and the corresponding page in revelation, between, let us say for example, the history of creation engraven on the earth's strata and the Mosaic record of the same epoch, it is still possible that the contradiction may resolve itself into a difference in the point of view from which each account is taken. In short, what at first sight may seem to be an irreconcilable discrepancy between two contradictory records, may in reality cover two different methods, each equally legitimate in its own sphere and for its own purposes, of stating the same positive truth.

It is almost superfluous to urge that it is for the interests of truth, no less than of revelation, that such investigations should not be left in the hands of representatives of either party interested in the question, to the exclusion of the other. Whilst we have no right to claim that the scientific account of creation should be moulded upon the Scripture records of it, so neither may we allow the latter to be set aside as inaccurate simply because they do not directly fall in with the conclusions arrived at by each in turn of the exponents of the former.

Turning now to the question as to the applicability of the established laws of criticism to the contents of Scripture, (*b*), we must again, as before, begin with the concession that the documents which profess to embody the revelation of God to man make no claim, at least, to entire exemption from the laws to which all other written and historical documents are amenable; whilst, on the other hand, their very importance does render it highly desirable that their credibility should be placed beyond the reach of suspicion by being subjected to every test that can in reason be imposed upon them.

We shall have occasion in the course of a following chapter to enter into a detailed discussion of the applicability of the rules of historical criticism to one particular feature in the Scripture record. For the present we will simply call attention to the fact, (and it may be regarded in the light of the first practical limitation to the concession just made,) that in thus dealing with Scripture we are not (as in the case of a criticism applied to an ordinary historical document) engaged in the dissection of a lifeless corpse, which, however misconducted, leads to no direct and positive harm; but with a living framework more intimately connected with ourselves and with all around us than is even the framework of our own bodies, and one the least, even unintentional, mishandling of which may involve others besides ourselves in the most fearful consequences.

Nor, again, must we lose sight of the fact that if, on the one hand, Scripture presents its points of resem-

blance to other written documents, so also it presents its points of divergence from them; and, indeed, it is these latter, and not the former, which constitute its essential characteristics. If, so far as it partakes of the character of ordinary historical writings, it comes, *ipso facto*, within the ordinary jurisdiction of historical criticism, so, on the other hand, just so far as it transcends the sphere of the former it transcends the jurisdiction which is co-extensive indeed, but only co-extensive, with it. To require, then, that Scripture should in all respects submit itself to be judged of by the ordinary laws of criticism, itself the abstraction of ordinary human literature, is to begin by at once begging the whole question at issue, when we ought to come prepared to listen to the peculiar claims which revelation professes to have upon our allegiance.

And surely this consideration by itself ought to put us doubly on our guard against allowing the investigation into the genuineness and credibility, to say nothing of the inspiration, of Holy Scripture to be conducted solely, or even mainly, by persons whose known bias must lead us to suspect that they will not restrict themselves to such a limited use of the instruments placed at their disposal, as the cause of equity and even of common humanity demands.

If, after all, during the course of investigations, however impartially conducted, a shock should at times appear to be given to some outwork of our belief, let us examine whether this may not have been the con-

sequence of an incautious extension of our own lines of defence beyond the ground actually traced out for our occupation by Scripture itself; and further, let us balance the loss, real or imaginary, whichever it may be, which we have so sustained by the counter consideration of the additional security, in which this very same process has resulted, of our main position.

Moreover, as scepticism has her twofold source, in the heart as well as in the head, so in the depths of our moral and spiritual instincts we may at all times find a ready and safe anchorage for our faith amidst all the fluctuations which may at times beset our mental surface.

To the young enquirer after truth let me address one more word, by way of advice and caution. Whilst fully admitting the fact that reason is eventually to take precedence of all other methods in establishing your belief, still do not blind yourself to the equally undoubted fact that it is only by degrees, often by very slow degrees indeed, that God thinks fit to entrust each of us in succession with the full and free use of this at once serviceable and dangerous instrument. Meanwhile, till you have good grounds for feeling that you are intrusted with full possession of it and no less fully trained in its use, do not repudiate the care which, in consideration for your inability to help yourself, God Himself has taken of you in intrusting you provisionally to the charge and instruction of others, who are themselves some steps in advance of you in life, and who have

already had the opportunity of acquiring the exact information of which you are but beginning to travel in search. And above all, let us all remember this—that revelation to be fairly appreciated must be met by a congenial spirit on our own part, corresponding to the high and holy character of the truths which she contains. She must be approached in the spirit of earnest and frequent prayer, that He who has deigned to reveal His ways and will to man may also deign to open our eyes to discern His revelation in all the extent and fulness of its beauty.

And, lastly, let us remember that revelation does not so much profess to provide materials for our intellectual activity as a practical guide and handbook for our journey through this life to the life which lies beyond it; and it is only by fully acting up to it in this latter respect, by a practical realization of its contents, and by the appropriation of all our different faculties to their respective objects, that we can hope to impart a permanent vitality even to our belief. It is not, indeed, improbable, nay, rather it is exceedingly probable, that the force of this practical realization and appropriation should have been beforehand taken into exact account by Him who launched His revelation into the world with so much, and so much only, force as was necessary to secure its reception at the hands of those who by their willingness proved their worthiness to receive it.

2. Another form of scepticism which may be noticed as especially characteristic of the present age, is shewn

in the tendency to depreciate the positive and historical element in revelation, and to dethrone from their true position the corresponding faculties in man whereby he is enabled to apprehend and appropriate it, and in the place of these latter to elevate a faculty of purely moral or spiritual growth to the rank of supreme if not of sole arbiter over the former, with full power to confirm or reject every statement contained in it, according as it is found in harmony with or dissonance from its own subjective standard of feeling.

The same tendency exhibits itself under a still more developed shape in the entire rejection of all external revelation as impossible, or at least incredible, and in confining belief to the assemblage of truths supposed to be educed straight from the religious consciousness, or else apprehended directly by the faculty of pure intuition or reason.

As regards the first-mentioned of these two tendencies, I will only remark on the utter absurdity of dignifying any such form of belief with the name of Christianity. It in truth does equal injustice to both of the two elements out of which it aims at constructing its system. Ascribing to one sole faculty in man a prerogative which all experience combines in telling us it is utterly incapable of exerting, and one which indeed itself is the very first to repudiate, it at the same time does equal violence to revelation by requiring that what presents itself under a permanent and objective form should accommodate itself to the subjective standard of a faculty

which is found to vary with each successive generation, and, indeed, is not to be found exactly alike in any two individuals. In short, it first misrepresents and misshapes human nature, in order that human nature may, in its turn, misrepresent and misshape revelation.

As regards the second-mentioned and more consistent, and yet still more deadly error, of confining religious belief to the truths supposed to be elicited directly from the spiritual consciousness or feeling, or to be directly apprehended by the intuition or pure reason, we will for the present content ourselves with representing it as an arbitrary inversion of the whole order of nature, a vain attempt to uplift the pyramid of truth from off its base, and establish it again on its apex. It forcibly isolates itself from all surrounding objects, which nevertheless persist in as forcibly thrusting themselves again upon it, in spite of all its efforts to disclaim their acquaintance. It deliberately rejects all the instruments, save one, with which it finds itself supplied, one and all by the same providential hand, for the discovery of truth and establishment and maintenance of its belief; and this one it thrusts upon a task in order to the performance of which the very assistance is secretly summoned and obtained which was so peremptorily denied it,—the task of penetrating the dark recesses of consciousness, or of traversing the boundless regions of intellect in pursuit of the glimmering phantoms of truth, whose impalpable forms and flitting movements securely elude every attempt that is made to grasp them.

CHAPTER III.

THE SUM OF EXISTENCE.

WHATEVER objections may be raised against any or indeed every form of so-called revelation, there can be no doubt that there does exist much of which, so far as our natural powers of intelligence and research are concerned, we are left in entire ignorance. We cannot hesitate to acknowledge as an undoubted fact, that we are in the midst of a vast system which stretches into infinity on every side of us; a system in which this world, and in this world the whole human race, of which we severally are but units, with all its vast periods of history, past, present, and to come, occupies the smallest conceivable space.

It is, of course, possible that much of all this, though as existing it must in itself be cognizable, yet to us, constituted as we at present are, may be not only out of our reach, but also absolutely incomprehensible. Still it exists just the same, independently of our conception or want of conception of it all. And surely the mere possibility of the existence of such a system, even apart from the question of any relation subsisting between it and ourselves, ought to make us think and feel differently from what we should do had we reason to believe that we were alone in existence.

But if from the mere existence of such a system

around us, standing in no relation of any kind to ourselves, we next add on the supposition that this vast scheme includes us as part and portion of itself, and stands in actual relations of various kinds to us, with what an additional interest in it ought we not to feel ourselves inspired. With what a motive would it furnish us to gain, if possible, some kind of conception of it all, or at least of the particular place in it assigned to ourselves, and that not from mere idle curiosity, but from the desire to promote the efficiency of the relations between us and the rest of the system. Especially would this be so if we found reason to believe that a change was from time to time taking place in these relations. And that such a change is constantly taking place would be naturally suggested to us even by what we see passing in ourselves. For we feel ourselves, both in our individual and collective capacity, to be not stationary, but in continual progress; and even this fact by itself would seem to be enough to vary the relations between us and all else that exists, supposing the latter to be stationary. On the other hand, supposing it to be, like ourselves, progressive, there must be, to say the least, a development of relations between us and it continually taking place, which would seem to require a no less continual re-adjustment.

And supposing this progress to have some definite end in view, and that man's final destiny held at least some place in it, it is plain that a knowledge of this latter would be requisite in order to our gaining any-

thing like a correct view even of our present state. We should then, for the first time, learn to appreciate the temporary and subordinate relations in which we now stand when we have discovered those into which they finally merge.

It may indeed be said in reply, that between ourselves and any such system as above supposed, relations of various kinds may be, nay, must be constantly maintained quite independently of all consciousness of them on our part. And indeed this very objection may suggest the possibility of the Divine scheme affecting the whole race of mankind in ways and degrees of which we are left in ignorance; nor is such a supposition utterly devoid of countenance from the inspired pages of revelation itself, though given to us, as it was, to dispel and not to countenance such ignorance, it is not likely that on this head it would be explicit. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that relations of this kind chiefly affect man in his lowest capacity as he exists in common with the brute and even inanimate portion of the creation, whilst they leave unexercised all those higher faculties of intelligence and self-evolved will which constitute man's most distinguishing feature, and which seem given him for the very purpose of sustaining his proper character on the stage of the universe. And now, in accordance with this view, let us again picture to ourselves the development and progress of relation between man and the system in which he moves, as the result not of mere

self-acting impulses and laws, but of conscious and responsible agencies. How much of additional motive would not this impart to man, to discover as far as possible the nature of things around him and before him.

At the risk of adding still further to the already complicated scene before us, I must, in conclusion, just advert to the possibility of a disturbance having taken place at some past point in the course of the relation between man and the system in which he is placed. In this case, then, an additional power would seem to be called for to re-adjust and compose the equilibrium between them, and to direct them again into the straight and onward path from which they have deflected. It is needless to insist on the great advantage which would accrue to us if made acquainted with the general fact, at least, of such a disturbing force, especially if the disturbance in the first instance arose in any degree from man's own instrumentality, in which case a corresponding exertion of the same kind of agency would naturally seem to be required in order to re-adjust and compose it. And any, even the very slightest disclosure of the general outline of this system, however little of detailed information it may give us respecting our present condition and circumstances, would obviously be far more useful to us as hints for our direction and objects for our practical exertions, than any amount of the most precise information respecting our present state, with which we are only temporarily and subordinately connected.

At this point, then, revelation presents itself to our view. She comes before us with the profession to give just the kind and degree of information which we require.

She lifts just so much of the veil from off the face of the unseen world as to enable us to form something like a definite conception of it. She leads us back through just so much of the past as is necessary to explain the position in which we at present find ourselves, and discloses just so much of the future as is necessary to give to the present a practical aim and direction. She explains to us exactly what is required of us, and how far the means of our own disposal fall short of satisfying these requirements, and whence the deficiencies thence arising may be made good.

Whether this revelation, as it claims to be considered, is to be accepted by us as true, of course must depend upon the evidence by which it is supported; but thus much may at once be fairly assumed, that Christianity as contained in the Scripture, and as embodied in the history of the Church at large, is the only religion which can lay any claim at all to the title of a revelation. And her immense importance, if true, must impose a proportionate responsibility upon those who reject her without at least lending a most thorough and impartial consideration both to her contents and to the credentials with which they are accompanied.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WRITTEN WORD.

ON the table before me, scattered over with newspapers and periodicals of the day, and a few volumes of general literature and history, lies a copy of the English version of the Bible.

And the sight of it, especially in such a juxtaposition as this, may call up in different minds the most opposite trains of thought and argument. Let us endeavour to accompany one or two of these on their way.

How is it possible, exclaims a sceptic of the last-mentioned school, that this volume, printed and bound just like any other book, and subject, like them, to every kind of accident, can be the divinely appointed vehicle of a revelation to me from heaven? What possible relation can exist between this speechless, inanimate thing before me, and my own living and thinking soul? It and I stand in two distinct spheres, entirely apart from each other, and with nothing whatever to serve as a link of connection between us. Nay, even regarding the Bible as addressing itself, like any other book, simply to my mental intelligence, besides that it leads me away into remote provinces of history, into which I feel no interest in following it, the very language in which it was originally composed is unintelligible to me. How,

then, is it possible that I can be supposed to look to any such quarter as this for a revelation?

And now let us start afresh from the same point on a different route. The sight of a Bible lying among the books and printed papers suggests to me at once a resemblance and a distinction between it and them. The distinction we shall try to arrive at by degrees; let us begin by tracing the resemblance.

Taking the newspaper first into my hands, I find that even from it I may extract a most serious and instructive lesson. Not to dwell on the daily vicissitudes of human life, the extent and variety of human wickedness, brightly relieved it is true with occasional gleams of human wisdom and goodness, which form the chief burden of every page, we have only to glance at the head of the very first column of the leading newspaper of the day, in order to invest what at first sight may seem the most trivial kind of publication with the deepest possible solemnity. It is there that under the same unvarying announcement of births and deaths, each day in succession gathers in a fresh list of names and titles. Into what a fearfully short summary is the life of man here seen to compress itself! What a daily remembrancer is here held up to us of our own approaching departure from the world, by the same broad track that we here daily see trodden by others before us! Let us stoop to gather one more instructive lesson still from the same source. The scenes which the newspaper lays before us to-day are for the most part

gathered in fresh from the events of yesterday, thus already in the course of a few hours transferred straight from the region of actual existence into that of history, already enrolled as the last in the series of records which, under one shape or other, and however mutilated in some places and traced in mysterious cypher in others, yet descend in almost unbroken continuity from the very first days of creation down to the present hour, whilst they at the same time present us with the very first in the backward series of steps which from our position in the present we have to take in order to reach the past.

And now from the newspaper of to-day let us turn to one or two of the volumes of history which lie beside it, and with which it has already established a claim of connection. Whilst occupied, then, with these volumes, I find myself insensibly wafted up the stream of human existence down which the events of my own life are daily carrying me; I find myself landed first at one point and then at another of the banks on either side of me. I am introduced to generation after generation, and race after race of my fellow men, each of them girt in with the circle of their own peculiar circumstances, which at once act on them, and are reacted on by them in return. I find myself intimately linked to all with whom I am thus brought successively into contact by the ties of a common origin and nature at least, if not by the still closer ties of relationship or of sympathy; whilst from the study of each I find that I

may gather lessons which I may turn to my own practical advantage, and to the advantage again of a great portion of my contemporaries and successors on the face of the globe. Lastly, intertwining itself in places with these and kindred histories, and at the same time superadding a specific history of its own; laying its foundations deep in the earth to which it has descended, and thence again rearing itself aloft into the heaven from whence it came; appropriating to itself some of the records of time, and impressing them afresh with the stamp of eternity; recognising the reality and importance of the history of this world, in at once linking and at the same time subordinating it to the history of the world above, the Bible in turn comes forward to offer itself to our acceptance, as forming a new and concluding series in the history of man: and what, then, is to hinder its being bound up with the other volumes of history, to which it provides at once the introduction and the complement?

CHAPTER V.

THE SPOKEN WORD.

LET us now take one or two steps in advance in order to gain a fresh point of view from which to survey the field before us. Hitherto in speaking of God's revelation to man, I have identified it with the Book in which it is preserved and transmitted to us. Indeed, the two words Revelation and Bible have been so long regarded as synonymous, that my remark will probably appear unmeaning from its very truism. I do not wish to dispute the fact of their present identity. The Bible is, and for ages has been, the one sole source of all our acquaintance with the divine mysteries. But we must recollect that this was not the case always. Revelation has existed independently of the Bible, independently of every portion of it, because, in the first instance at least, antecedent to it all. Again, subsequently, after the consignment to writing of the earliest communication from God to man, still each successive communication, almost without exception, was, in the first instance, delivered through the channel of the living voice, before taking up its more permanent abode in the world in its written form. I have already, by way of illustration to the remark above made by me, alluded to the revelation accorded to our first parents, when, as if to reconcile them to their approach-

ing expulsion from the garden of Eden into the wilderness of the world, the great mystery of man's redemption was for the first time partially unfolded to their view.

Now it is to the Bible, and it alone, that we ourselves are indebted for our acquaintance, both with the general fact of this announcement, and the precise terms in which it was conveyed. But it was otherwise with our first parents. It was communicated to them in living words, not addressed to them in writing; and it in all probability continued to be transmitted in the same verbal form, in which it had been first received, through several successive generations.

From the first in a long series of steps which gradually led up to the full disclosure of this great mystery, let us once more take our stand upon the actual scene of its enactment. And here, again, it was not through the medium of a book, but in living acts and words that it revealed itself to men. We stand indebted for our redemption to the person of a Redeemer who spoke, who did, and suffered, but who, from all the information which we have respecting Him, we are led to believe did not commit a single word to writing. And as Jesus Christ did not Himself commit His acts or words to writing, so neither do we know that He gave any express orders to His disciples to commit to writing what whilst with Him they had seen and heard. Indeed, the absence of any statement to the effect that He did, renders it highly probable that He did not.

Certainly for some time after His ascension, His Apostles continued to preach the word without committing it to writing. And when in process of time they began to write, they still continued to issue orders through the medium of their letters to the different Churches to which they wrote them, to keep the oral deposits with which they had been at first entrusted. I am not now speaking at all disrespectfully of the New Testament, when I say that a great, if not the greater, portion of its contents arose out of what we, in our utter ignorance of the ways and means used by God's superintending Providence, should call by the name of accidental circumstances. It was these that led St. Paul to write at one time to one particular Church, at another to another, and that not for the purpose of again laying the foundations of their faith, which had been already accomplished by his preaching, but in order to exhort them to build upon the foundations which he had already laid, to correct some fault or to make good some deficiencies in the structure which they had begun to rear. It was to correct the inaccurate statements of those who had taken upon themselves to write accounts of the sayings and doings of the blessed Lord, that St. Luke composed his own authoritative history.

It is indeed most true, that in proportion as these oral deposits began to fade from the memories upon which they had been first imprinted, and to suffer still more in their transmission from the memory of one generation of believers to that of another,—in proportion, on

the other hand, as the scattered writings of the Apostles and their companions, themselves now gathered to their rest, were gradually formed into one complete collection,—the latter began first to take precedence of, and eventually altogether to supersede, the former. But this fact, as it does, on the one hand, most amply justify us in our present practice of identifying the Bible with Revelation, so, on the other hand, it must not blind us to the fact of the two having been originally distinct from one another.

And it is in this latter fact, rather than in the former, that we are to seek the true key to the solution of many of the difficulties in which the subject of revelation is enveloped. It is here we gain the true central point of view from whence to regard the system of God's dealings with mankind, from which our modern habit (however correct and serviceable in practice) of regarding the Bible almost in the light of a book written in heaven, and thence dropped upon the earth, contributes materially to exclude us.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN MEDIA, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN 1. THE INCARNATION; 2. PROPHECY, &c.

LET me begin this chapter with a brief recapitulation of what I was last engaged in saying.

The particular form, then, that of a book, under which Revelation at present transmits, and indeed for ages has continued to transmit, itself to mankind, is to be regarded in the light of an accidental feature in its character rather than in that of an essential one.

The essential feature (which is indeed clearly indicated by what at the same time fails itself to give to it its full expression) is this, that in the place of announcing His revelations immediately to every man, God has in His infinite wisdom thought fit to consign them to some for the benefit in turn of all the rest. Again, in the place of endowing these His appointed messengers with any fresh set of faculties or instruments wherewith to convey the messages with which they were charged to their brethren, He has thought fit to leave them to the use (subject to His especial guidance and control) of the ordinary faculties and instruments with which as men they were already provided.

The prophets and other inspired men spoke or wrote according as circumstances called for the one or the other of these the two methods of communication which

they had at their disposal. And as a general rule, they first spoke and then wrote, because speech was the most natural and familiar, as it was also the most useful, of the two methods at their disposal for the distribution of the divine messages with which they were charged to the men of their own day; whilst, again, writing was the most secure and permanent of the two methods for the transmission of the same message to the generations who were yet to come.

Whilst, therefore, we regard the revelation which we have received at the hands of God's chosen messengers as itself undoubtedly divine, so the particular form under which it presents itself to us at the present day, and under which it has imparted itself to many generations before us, the form, I mean, of a book, is as undoubtedly to be regarded as human.

Moreover, it is this latter aspect of revelation, however it may at first sight seem to constitute a weak point in its position, which in reality furnishes us with the very point of all from which we may most securely defend it. For it is an illustration, and, save one, it is the greatest illustration, of the principle on which God has uniformly acted throughout all His dealings with man, by which man is himself made the instrument of every blessing to his fellow men.

It is a principle which meets us at every turn throughout the whole length and width of both of the two great departments of God's kingdom. It is one to whose agency we each of us stand indebted for our

first entrance into the world, for our continued support in it, and which accordingly, as it is used or abused, is found to advance or retard every step which we take in life. And in all this nature exhibits herself as an exact type of redemption. The principle of the employment of human agency for the benefit of man, is one which exhibits itself to us in the very highest and most supernatural of God's dealings with man, as well as in the very lowest and most natural. It further exhibits itself to us, a point to which I shall shortly have to call especial attention, in those intermediate grades which intervene between the highest of all and the lowest of all.

It is, I need hardly say it, in the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ that this principle is seen to embody itself as its highest and most sacred example. The Son of God was made Son of man for the very purpose of becoming, as man, the special channel of God's highest revelation and choicest gifts to His brethren. And it is from this the central doctrine, or rather central fact, of revelation, that we are alone enabled to recognise the fair proportions and perfect symmetry displayed in its arrangement, whilst, regarded from any other point of view than this, the same scene presents us with nothing but an endless maze of complications and contradictions.

Towards this, as the culminating point of God's dealings with men and of His revelation to them, a long series of prophets and priests had pointed, and

step by step led the way, through all the various degrees of the ascent, till it was finally gained and surmounted.

It is, then, let me repeat it, to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ,—including of course in this term all the results which spontaneously flowed from it, as the life, the death, the triumph over death in the resurrection, and the ascension in the fulness of both natures, divine and human, into heaven,—that we must look for the full exemplification of the great principle, that God for some, to us, at present inscrutable reason, has thought fit to make the basis of all His dealings with man; whilst, further, this same event is even still more important as exhibiting to us the one single point of actual contact at which our own nature has arrived with the Divine nature, the one solitary arch thrown across the gulph which separates created man from his Maker. Next in order, and forming a like, though subordinate exemplification of the same great principle, stand the particular individuals selected and empowered by God to become the bearers of His revelations to their brethren, or to record for the benefit of after generations the events with which these revelations were interwoven or connected.

These men, therefore, must be regarded by us in a twofold light. Regarded in themselves, they stand on the same ground that we ourselves stand; and, consequently, on an infinitely lower level than that occupied by Him of whom we have just been speaking,—parted from Him, in fact, by the whole interval which inter-

venes between sinful man and his Redeemer. On the other hand, regarded as specially called and qualified to become the bearers of divine messages or the recorders of events pervaded with the divine element, we must look upon them as endowed with a kind of temporary inspiritualization, at once in harmony with and subordinate to the higher and permanent mystery of the Incarnation. And the result of this, the second great example of the principle of human agency employed in the transmission of divine blessings, is shewn, as we have already seen, in the at first spoken, and subsequently written, word as we possess it in the Bible.

Let us pause for a moment to again look at the Bible from this particular point of view on which we are now standing. It, then, like those also to whose instrumentality we owe it, admits of being regarded in a twofold aspect. Viewed in its source and essence, and with reference to the authority with which it is invested, it is emphatically the record of God's revelation to man. Viewed, on the other hand, in its accidental and subordinate character, and with reference to the intermediate stage which it had to pass on its way, it is the voice or the writing of men, inspired doubtless for the purpose, yet never ceasing to retain that nature which belonged to them as men.

And so — I need hardly insist on it — in order to a complete view of the character of the Bible these its two separate aspects must be each in turn contemplated, and both combined, since each of them is in its own

degree, within its own sphere, alike real and significant. I do not say that for practical purposes the recognition of each is equally essential. Far from it. We shall doubtless best devote ourselves to the contents of the message delivered to us when we entirely lose sight of the presence of the messenger. To see in the Bible nothing but God's own word addressed to our own individual selves is the first, and will be the last, as it is always the most profitable, way in which to regard it. To the light of its inspired pages generation after generation have looked for their sole guidance during their earthly career, and through it have been ushered in to the very Source from whence it emanates, and to which it leads the way. And so long as we can continue to put the Bible solely to this use, it will be our chief wisdom and happiness to persevere in doing so.

But, as a matter of fact, we cannot all of us always confine ourselves to this view of it. And even if we could, still occasions may sometimes arise which call upon us to regard the subject in its other, though more homely and subordinate aspect. In seasons when storms are wildly raging around us, and cries of distress are heard, we may feel ourselves called upon to go to the relief of those who are being tossed to and fro upon the waves of doubt and liable at any moment to make shipwreck of their faith, and to endeavour to pilot them into the still waters of the harbour in which we have found rest and safety ourselves—it may be from the very same dangers.

There are numerous questions which perhaps had better remained for ever unasked, and which yet, once put, demand a satisfactory answer, at least so far as any satisfactory answer can reasonably be expected. And one of these questions refers to the precise relation in which these messengers from God to man may be supposed to have stood towards their divine sender, and the extent to which we may safely identify the message as originally delivered to them by God, and by them again transmitted to us.

But here let me advert to one limitation which necessarily attaches itself to the contents of revelation, quite irrespectively of the particular question now before us, —a limitation arising not so much out of the mode in which revelation has been conveyed as out of its ultimate destination. Had revelation, instead of being spoken or written, as we have seen that it was, by the lips and fingers of men, been spoken or written by the lips or fingers of God Himself; had it, instead of being communicated, as we have seen it was, to man through the medium of some of their fellow-men, chosen rather to address itself directly to each individual of every generation who has at any time helped to make up the sum total of our race, still, in order to discharge its very first and chiefest office, that of revealer, to any practical purpose whatever, it must necessarily have adapted itself in some measure to the capacities of those for whose benefit it was intended.

And if, again, from supposing her to address herself

thus directly to every individual of every race and generation of the world alike, we come one step nearer to what was actually the case, by supposing her to address herself directly to each individual of the one race or the one generation only of men who were on the face of the earth at each time of her so addressing herself, we shall recognise a call for still farther self-adaptation in the peculiar mental and moral condition of each successive generation amongst whom in turn she came.

And practically speaking, this, with a difference which we shall presently come to, but which in no way interferes with what I am now insisting on, is the very limitation which revelation, as we possess it in the Bible, actually exhibits to our view. And it will at once serve to explain to us the slow development of the great mystery of redemption, as from its first faint germ it proceeded gradually to unfold itself through the successive ages whose history is recorded in the Old Testament; whilst, on the other hand, the fact of the eventual manifestation of the mystery itself, combined with the fact of the cessation of all revelation from that time forwards, will prepare us to accept the New Testament as the final and most perfect form in which revelation can be presented to man during this his present state of existence, and such as no amount of mental, or moral, or spiritual progress can hope to outgrow or venture to embody in a higher form. The faith as it was once for all (ἅπαξ) delivered to the saints, will for ever remain the best model by which to frame our own.

And now, turning from this digression, and addressing ourselves directly to the question before us: not only, as we have seen, did revelation address itself to men, and to each in turn of successive generations of men, but in order to reach them it submitted to be conveyed by the lips and pens of individual men. And the question, therefore, for our present consideration is this —What are we to believe was the exact position occupied by these heralds of the divine messages, in what relation did they stand towards the divine Source and Communicator to them of the tidings which they were to bear to their brethren, and in what way are we to believe that their faculties were made instrumental for the due performance of their high and sacred office?

I think a moment's reflection will suffice to convince us of the utter hopelessness of our ever in this life obtaining a complete insight into a subject so replete as this is with mystery, involving as it would do, on the one hand, a minute acquaintance with the special operations of that Spirit which bloweth where it listeth, so that though we can hear the sound thereof, yet we cannot tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth; and involving, on the other hand, a no less minute analysis, far beyond any that we at present possess, or, so long as we are enclosed within our present sphere of existence, can ever hope to arrive at, into all the operations of each of our own faculties both in their normal and abnormal condition, both in themselves and in co-operation with or subjection to the Divine Spirit.

We will therefore content ourselves with first attempting such a brief outline of the subject as naturally suggests itself; availing ourselves, secondly, of such helps to its completion or correction as are afforded either by the character of the contents themselves of Holy Scripture, or by the incidental notices contained in it.

The general position, then, of a prophet, — (and in speaking now for convenience sake with more direct reference to those charged by God with a distinct revelation or message, I wish to be understood as referring by implication to the inspired recorders of the historical events in which revelation is embodied, as, *vice versâ*, whatever may be said of the latter must be understood as referring by the same process of implication to the former,)—the general position, then, of a prophet is that of a selected human medium of communication from God to man. He is the stage, as it were, or rather one of the actors on the stage on which the great drama of revelation is exhibited before the audience of the world.

By way of providing ourselves with materials for the farther completion of the sketch just traced by us, let us next proceed to a brief review of the various possible kinds and degrees of relation which we can conceive the inspired prophet to occupy towards his divine Prompter.

1. The simplest and perhaps the most obvious form under which we can conceive of him, is that of a mouthpiece or pen under the direct control of the divine influence, and engaged in the task of simply announcing

or recording the divine message in the exact words in which it flowed from the lips or was traced by the finger of God Himself; or, still maintaining the same view of his position, we may conceive of him under the figure of a sheet of perfectly even and transparent glass or crystal, which simply performs the office of transmitting every object exactly as presented to it, without the least refraction or discoloration.

2. With a slight variation of the prophet's position, we may conceive of him under the same general figure of a sheet of glass or crystal, transparent still and perfectly free, as in the former instance, from every flaw or inequality of surface, but tinged in this instance with a peculiar colour of its own, which it imparts in turn to all the objects received and transmitted by it, in all other respects representing them exactly as before.

And this colour may be conceived of either as the same in every individual case, or as slightly varying in each according as it is made to stand for the necessary laws of conception and thought which form part of the universal inheritance of our nature, or for that slight modification of these which may be supposed to characterise the particular race, or generation, or even individual for the time being.

3. Under both the above heads we have regarded the prophet simply in the light of a passive, whether conscious or unconscious, instrument under the immediate control and direction of an external force.

But we may also, without at all departing from that due subordination to the Divine Spirit which the very idea of the prophet's position itself implies, conceive of him as actively co-operating in the work of which he is himself the scene.

And in proportion as we so view him, the more we shall feel disposed to attribute to him of the particular form in which the divine communication with which he has been charged is enveloped. The selection of the particular words and phrases which embody it, the structure and arrangement of its sentences, the arguments which are used to enforce it, the illustration with which it is embellished, each or all will be regarded as more or less the results of the operations of the prophet's own mind, as it exerts itself at once with all the spontaneous activity of its own impulse, and yet in exact accordance with and in the completest subordination to the divine agency.

4. The term 'prophecy' has been at times applied to a mere internal illumination of man's natural faculties unaccompanied with any supernatural communication from above, so as, in short, simply to denote the highest possible pitch of elevation of which man's nature is susceptible, and to which the ordinary influences of development and cultivation might, under very favourable circumstances, be supposed capable of raising it.

The above classification will, I think, furnish us with a sufficiently close and correct analysis for our present purpose.

It remains now to ask to which of the above heads does Scripture itself, either by the general character of its contents or the incidental information which it supplies, seem most to refer itself.

I need hardly say that it is most decisive against the acceptance of the one last mentioned as at all accounting for the main phenomena of the case. In fact, such a view of revelation as is there presented is tantamount to a total denial of revelation altogether, and is at direct and open variance with the general character of the contents of Scripture, no less than with the repeated assertion on the part of its composers of the divine source from whence they drew. In short, if Scripture is not a lie from beginning to end, it is a record of actual and specific communications from God to man.

The first two heads of classification, I proceed next to remark, exhibit a distinction rather than a difference. I have already called attention to the necessary limit imposed upon the form of divine revelation by the very nature and constitution of man, for whose instruction they were intended. I have shewn that this limitation is entirely independent of the particular mode in which these revelations were actually conveyed to man; that it would have been necessarily in all respects the same if revelation had addressed herself directly to each individual, instead of consigning herself, as she actually has done, to the charge of some for the benefit of all.

Turning now to the consideration of this latter and actual case,—the communication, I mean, of revelation

through the medium of individuals selected for the purpose,—I have in the first two heads of classification as given above, directed attention to the two, and only two, possible scenes of the actual occurrence of the limitation alluded to.

In the first, I have supposed revelation to have accommodated herself to the nature and constitution of man, and of the particular race and generation for whose immediate use and benefit it was intended, before leaving the divine mind, and, consequently, before entering into the mind of the prophet.

Whereas in the second I have supposed the mind of the prophet to be itself the scene and self-acting mould in which the necessary limitation took place.

But whatever difference may exhibit itself between these two cases, they so far exactly resemble each other, in that each denotes the same entirely passive state in the mind of the prophet, even as regards the very terms in which the message with which he is charged is delivered by him. And so far, therefore, as our present question is concerned, both these two heads may be considered and treated as one.

And now, regarding them in this their common point of agreement, it must, I think, be conceded that such a theory of prophecy or of inspiration, however it may fall in with single expressions of Scripture, yet is equally far from accounting for the whole of the phenomena with which the same Scripture presents us.

Without going into all the details of the subject,

I will only call attention to the striking variations of style and method of conducting arguments which are so distinctly traceable in the different composers of Scripture even of the same time and locality, and which evince an individual activity of thought and expression quite inconsistent with the notion of their having been only passive instruments in the hands of another. For further proof, if needed, I would refer to the terms in which St. Luke speaks of himself in the opening verses of his Gospel.

Let us now pass on to the third and only remaining head of classification above given, which will, I believe, be alone found capable of accounting for all the phenomena which the Bible presents, whilst it at the same time gives a new meaning to the employment of human agents in the service of revelation, by exhibiting them at once in all the free activity of their own, and at the same time in the completest subordination to the divine nature; free, indeed, with that noble freedom which consists not in defiance or independence of, but in thorough harmony with and conformity to, the divine Word; such a freedom, in short, as would in practice exhibit itself under the shape of thorough conformity to the divine will.

The prophets, then, and other inspired speakers and writers, are to be regarded as occupying an intermediate position in the graduated scale of human agency, which, ascending upwards till it arrives at the full incorporation of the human into the divine nature in the

one Person of Jesus Christ, descends as far below them through the various agencies employed in the work of the preservation, transmission, and interpretation of these inspired records, into all the minute details by which man is made in various ways the daily instrument of assistance to his fellow men. Whilst, however, we accept this as the truest account that we can hope to arrive at of the precise position occupied by the inspired messengers, we must not blind ourselves to the fact that it also involves us in a certain amount of difficulty. What guarantee is there, it may be asked, under this hypothesis, that the prophets always restricted themselves to the proper exercise of the liberty which was allowed them? How are we to know that the words spoken or written by them are in exact accordance with what they themselves saw or heard? how are we to assure ourselves that much of what passed their lips or was traced by their pen is not the mere result of their own superadded and uninspired reflections, in short, the product of them as men, and not as the special subjects of the divine inspiration?

This, indeed, is an objection which, though I am convinced it is perfectly destitute of any real foundation, is nevertheless one which we must not pass over in silence.

Let us first endeavour to gain an exact view of the case as it stands actually before us.

We are not, then, now considering the case of the employment of one man as a messenger in the service

of another, in which case it is indeed fairly supposable that, from a mistake made in the selection of him, the message might in part, or even wholly miscarry; but we are considering the case of men chosen out of the whole number of individuals composing their generation, without respect to rank or circumstance, by the all-seeing, foreknowing Creator Himself. And may we not reasonably demand whether the fact of His selecting such a medium of communication in the first instance out of all the infinite means at His disposal, joined to the selection, in the second instance, of the particular individuals who were to discharge this office, does not amount to a sufficient guarantee to us of the correctness of the message as we ourselves receive it?

But this is not all that we have to rely on. We are also distinctly assured, and that upon the faith of every prophet and apostle whose writings form part of the volume of Scripture, that these messengers so selected, as we have already seen, were also specially endowed by the same Hand that selected them, with the peculiar qualifications requisite for the efficient performance of their sacred function.

If, on the one hand, we are able to gather by inference from the character of the contents of Scripture that in becoming inspired prophets, God's messengers did not at all cease from being men, in the full and emphatic sense of the term, but were left in the full possession and exercise (almost without exception) of all their faculties; so, on the other hand, we have the

most direct and positive assurance of the same Scripture that these same faculties were made entirely subservient to the conveyance of the divine Word in all its simplicity and fulness. Either, then, God has never spoken at all through men, or He has taken the precautions necessary for being correctly reported by them. This is the dilemma, one or the other of the alternatives of which is forced upon our acceptance.

In saying thus much, however, I must admit that I speak with a certain, I hope I shall shew unimportant, qualification. With the fullest belief in the inspiration of Holy Scripture, a doctrine warranted by the profusion of passages in the New Testament which assert in direct terms the divine inspiration of the Old, and reflected back with at least equal force from the pages of the Old Testament upon those of the New; warranted, again, as regards the latter by the close personal intercourse of the apostles with their divine Teacher throughout the whole duration of His ministry, and by His promise to them of the special gift of the Holy Spirit; warranted, further, by the independent claim of the Apostle Paul to an immediate divine source for his own commission and authority; recognised by the universal belief of the Church of Christ, from its very earliest infancy, through each successive stage of its existence, and in each of all the numerous fragments into which it is now so unhappily broken; impressing itself deeply upon every earnest and unprejudiced mind and heart upon a perusal of the contents themselves of the sacred

volume, I am nevertheless forced to acknowledge that the very same faculty which helps to convince me of the truth of this very doctrine, and of the entire veracity of the Scripture record on all substantial points, does at the same time oblige me to confess the existence of certain inaccuracies in Scripture on matters of historical detail, which however trifling in themselves, yet, found where they are, must not be passed over entirely unnoticed.

I am not now alluding to supposed discrepancies between Scripture and other histories on some points common to both, but I refer to discrepancies existing between one part of Scripture and another; trifling indeed, nay, so trifling, that anywhere but in Scripture they would be at once passed over in silence, unless quoted, as indeed they well might be, for the confirmation of all the numerous and important events in which the very same narratives which exhibit them are found in perfect yet independent agreement with each other, and yet, however trifling, such as to demand at once our recognition of them, and their own proper place in our estimation of them.

As examples, and at the same time proofs, of the actual existence of a certain number of such discrepancies and inaccuracies in the Scripture record, I will advert first to the impossibility as regards the four Gospel narratives, not only of combining the scattered elements of each into one entire and consistent whole, a task which further information on some points might

afford us further facilities for doing, but of reconciling some of the positive, definite statements contained in one Gospel with equally positive and definite statements of the same fact contained in another; and secondly, I will ask any person to compare the historical allusions to the book of Genesis which are to be found in the speech of the first martyr, Stephen, (Acts vii. 16, &c.), with the events of the history itself as recorded in the book of Genesis, (chap. xxxiii. 19, comp. chap. xxiii.), and I will leave it to him to say whether he can fairly arrive at any other conclusion than that an actual discrepancy, such as it is, exists between them.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not pointing out the existence of these occasional inaccuracies, as I believe them to be, with any purpose of throwing doubt on the general veracity of the Scripture record, but because I am most fully convinced that the surest way to invest these trifles with an importance which does not really belong to them, is to betray an undue and unbecoming anxiety to deny or to conceal their existence.

What, then, it will perhaps be asked, do you mean to infer from the presence, or supposed presence, of these errors in Scripture? and how do you reconcile your conviction of their existence with your belief at the same time in the divine inspiration of the volume which contains them?

My answer is simply and briefly this. Scripture, whilst distinctly claiming for herself infallibility as

regards all those points on which she came to enlighten us, lays no claim to the possession either of absolute knowledge or of entire immunity from error on such points as in no way affect the discharge of the specific errand with which she is so entrusted.

She does not pretend to be either an encyclopædia of science nor an universal history, nor a mirror of all objective existence; on the other hand, she does lay claim to be considered a full and perfect account of God's revelations to man, together with so much of the world's history, and of the history of events transacted in a still higher sphere, as is necessary to fully embody and illustrate them.

And all this, and more than this, is fully reconcilable with the existence in Scripture of such errors in point of detail as do not even invalidate, nay, in other histories might serve rather to confirm, her historical correctness.

It is true that there still remains a difficulty for us to encounter, and one which, most unfortunately for the interests of truth, upholders of the entire infallibility of every letter of Scripture are too often found ready to combine with the open impugners of the doctrine of inspiration in every shape and form in attempting to establish for their respective and opposite purposes, and which as it attaches itself to this particular subject in common only with other hardly less important departments of revealed religion, I shall not hesitate to enter upon somewhat in detail. Once allow the existence of

a single mistake in the Bible, and where, it is asked, are we to stop? where can we draw the exact line of demarcation between those portions of Scripture which may be supposed liable to error, and those that are exempt from it? how can we feel sure respecting any event or any doctrine whatever contained in Scripture that it does not come under the former of these two heads, and not the latter?

Now in answer to this it must be remembered, first, that as we are not responsible for the existence of these inaccuracies in Scripture, so neither are we responsible for the consequences which the acknowledgment of them, supposing them to exist, may fairly entail upon us. On the other hand, it is no less our duty than our right to protest against the method here had recourse to of holding up such conclusions in order to deter us from an impartial investigation of the facts which, rightly or wrongly, are supposed to involve them. If the facts are as we have stated them, they will remain so in spite of all conclusions which may be fastened upon them; if they are otherwise, then why not have recourse to the obvious method of directly proving them to be so?

Let me again begin by fully stating the exact case before us. The same Almighty Power who has put the Bible into our hands has also endowed us with certain faculties whereby to recognise its claim upon our belief; but if, in the very act of recognising these claims, some of these faculties are found to demur to this

or that particular statement in Scripture—and that not on the ground that it is above the power of human comprehension, nor, again, that its supernatural character cannot be recognised by a criticism which is itself abstracted from the observation of the ordinary laws of nature, but on the ground that, whilst belonging to a department which is subject to the jurisdiction of ordinary criticism, it is at the same time at variance with another statement of Scripture belonging also to the same department,—I ask, how can we dispute the validity of the conclusion thus forced upon us, without undermining all the other conclusions arrived at through the instrumentality of these same faculties; without, in short, making our reason as powerless in the defence of all the important contents of Scripture as the method of argument above employed seeks to make it powerless against those of no importance whatever? Continuing, then, to maintain the position already occupied, that the Bible does contain a certain amount of inaccuracies in point of historical details, and conceding, further, as with our present information and means of judging I think that we must confess ourselves obliged to do, that we are unable to draw any exact line of demarcation between those portions of Scripture which are liable to the imputation of error and those which are entirely exempt from it, let us consider next what course, under the circumstances, is the best for us to adopt.

And first, then, it is desirable always to keep in mind

that our notion or want of notion about things does not in the least degree interfere with the things themselves.

Thus the fact that we are at present unable to determine the exact line of demarcation in no way disproves or affects its existence; whilst, on the other hand, the fact of its existence does encourage us to hope that at some future time, and with the help of more information than we at present possess, we may be enabled to exactly discern it. Meanwhile our course lies plain before us. If the subject is beset with its minor difficulties, let us balance this fact with the consideration that in all its main points it is exhibited in a proportionate degree of clearness. If, on the one hand, an examination of the Bible history has resulted in the discovery of a certain number of unimportant historical inaccuracies, so, on the other, the same process has most materially contributed to strengthen the general credibility of the Scripture history, besides disposing us to the unhesitating acceptance of it as the full and infallible depositary of God's revelations to man.

Whilst, then, fully recognising, as in fairness we are bound to do, each of the above conclusions, arrived at by one and the same process, the first task in which we have to employ ourselves is that of using every possible endeavour to form a correct estimate, so far as we can, of the general extent and comparative value of each of the domains in Scripture to which these conclusions respectively refer. We must, at the same time, adopt

every available precaution against the encroachment on the part of one of these upon the other, particularly—for that alone is a matter of any practical importance—against the encroachment of the lesser and accidental upon the greater and essential.

And here, granting, as we are obliged to do, that from our present ignorance of the exact line which separates the two we cannot distinguish the precise point at which an encroachment may be said to commence, still there are points in its progress when its detection becomes easy enough. For instance, an objection to a doctrine or leading statement in Scripture, based upon the existence of such historical inaccuracies in it as have been above alluded to, or even upon the existence of far greater inaccuracies of the same or similar character, is most manifestly of the nature of such an encroachment, and must be at once met with the most determined resistance.

And further, whilst maintaining to the full the entire veracity of Scripture on all important points, let us if possible be still more mindful of the final object which it has in its view. Consigned, as without doubt it principally is, to the charge of the intellect, it is only in order that the intellect may in turn lay it open as a pasture-ground for the heart. And the more we put Scripture to this its highest use, the less we shall feel tempted to degrade it to any other. With our appetite at once satisfied and rekindled by the ample measures of spiritual food here provided for us, we shall escape

the temptation which nothing but an idle curiosity can ever impose upon us, of analyzing the exact quality of the soil which produces it, or the precise line with which it is bounded.

Such I firmly believe to be the best practical method of dealing with the objection which I have supposed to be raised.

And now, from confining ourselves to this particular subject, let us extend the horizon of our view, and after taking in the surrounding scenery, admire the wonderful order and consistency which pervades and connects the whole.

But first, let me say a word of caution against a fault in our method of regarding this and kindred subjects with which we are too chargeable. Instead of lending ourselves, as in common fairness we ought, to the scene which revelation presents to our view, it is our uniform practice to force all that we there see into conformity with some preconceived models or subjective standards of our own, in consequence of which, as may easily be conceived, one of her most characteristic features is entirely lost to us.

I shall, perhaps, best describe this mistaken tendency in fewest words by saying that it shews itself first in the attempt to invest with the exactest possible definitions all that in itself is purposely left indefinite; and secondly, in the attempt to force upon each of the many various degrees of probability an uniform character of absolute certainty. I may remark, further,

that it is a tendency peculiar to no particular age or school, but one which is more or less common to every individual in every age, each of whom in turn presumes to dictate to revelation the precise character with which, both as a whole and in each of its separate parts, it is to invest itself; as also the exact kind and degree of evidence with which, again both as a whole and in each of its separate parts, it is to be supported.

It is under the influence of this tendency that, whilst the unbeliever is always too ready to identify the absence of absolute demonstration in support of revelation with that of all proof whatever, thus converting the strongest probability on behalf of it into certainty against it, so, on the other hand, the various apologists for revelation, or for some one of its numerous details, are too apt to strive to force the appearance of demonstration on what refuses to bear any other character than that of a reasonable degree of probability.

It is under the influence of the same tendency, as it exhibits itself under the other of its two forms just adverted to, that we see the whole field of revelation surveyed and mapped out inch by inch, as though such a process was either sanctioned by revelation itself or requisite to its full appropriation by the heart of the believer.

Distinct as these two forms are in themselves, yet proceeding as they do from one common source, so both concur in ignoring the practical realization of the contents of the sacred volume to be the true complement

to the proofs which accompany its introduction; both likewise concur in ignoring the fact that the doctrines of revelation depict themselves not on the intellectual retina alone, but on the whole complex of our faculties, the co-operation of each of which, at once restricted to its own proper sphere and excited to the utmost intensity within it, is simultaneously required in order to elevate us to that point of our nature which constitutes *belief*, and which, viewed still further on at the point of practical absorption into its divine object, becomes elevated to the still higher title of *faith*.

In contrast with these misdirected tendencies on our part, though in conformity, as I shall presently endeavour to shew, with both our own nature and the circumstances with which our nature is surrounded, provided we only attend to them as we ought, revelation herself, whilst she presents us with the most living and substantial realities sketched with a master hand, yet almost uniformly abstains from investing them either with a definite exactness of outline or minuteness of finish. Again, whilst to each of these, and to all of them together, she assigns just so much evidence as is actually needed, she as uniformly abstains from elevating it from the character of probable into that of demonstrative proof.

Not only is there the same family resemblance observable in the character of each one of the doctrines of revelation with all the others, and again between the kind of proof adducible for one of its contents and that

for another, but also between the general character which pervades the one with that which pervades the other; between the at once living and yet unfinished portraits everywhere presented in the one, and the positive and at the same time undemonstrative proofs which the other affords to us of their authenticity. We discover in revelation just that same wonderful order and symmetry which is to be found nowhere else except in the kindred and correlative department of nature.

And now let us proceed to take one or two instances by way of illustration to the subject immediately before us.

And first as regards the absence, for the most part, of exact outline and minuteness of finish to the real and living portraits contained in Scripture.

Avoiding, then, as far as possible, topics which would naturally provoke a controversy, I will do no more than just allude in passing to the two Sacraments, as furnishing each of them a case exactly in point, and will pass on to an instance which the foregoing pages will help to suggest to us.

In 1 John ii. 20 we find the Apostle making use of the following words:—"But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things;" and ver. 27, "But the anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you, but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things," &c. Now what was the exact kind and degree of the anointing (χρῖσμα) here referred to? How

near did it approach to, how far did it fall short of, the inspiration of the Apostle himself? It is almost superfluous for me to say that this is a question that does not admit of any very definite answer. That St. John recognised in these Christians to whom he was writing a distinct divine guidance into truth is plain from his own words.

On the other hand, the fact itself of his writing to them, the authoritative tone which he assumes in part of his Epistle, joined to the personal relation in which he stood to Jesus Christ, and the especial gift of the Holy Spirit with which, in connexion with the rest of the apostles, he had been favoured, all combine to point to a wide distinction between his inspiration and theirs. Yet what that distinction was, what, in short, their inspiration consisted in, we cannot exactly determine. We can form a general idea of it, enough for our practical use, and that is all.

My next illustration shall be selected, not so much from a specific doctrine of Scripture, as from the general form under which it presents itself to our view. I refer to the collection of books which together form the canon of the Old and New Testaments. It is true that, as regards the great majority of these, and their respective contents, there has been all but universal agreement amongst Christians; on the other hand, the exact number of books, and the precise contents of some of them, have never ceased to be the subject of a certain amount of doubt, from the very first ages down to the present

moment. Granting that all Scripture is divinely inspired, the question still remains, what constitutes Scripture? and the answer, though practically all that can be desired, is yet by no means what can be termed logically exact and complete. The fact that there is no single doctrine of our Church which can be said to depend upon the authority of any of these disputed books or passages, is quite sufficient to prove the first half of my assertion; on the other hand, the very existence of such a dispute is a standing witness to the truth of the latter half of it, besides furnishing us with an instance exactly to our present point, of absence of sharpness of outline and completeness of finish to the forms which Scripture presents to us, alike regarded as a whole and in its separate and component parts.

And now, taking our leave of this department of the subject, let us proceed, secondly, to look at one or two illustrations of the kind and degree of evidence which we may expect in support of the general substance and several contents of Scripture; though, as this is a point which, from the able manner in which it has been already treated, has almost ceased to be a subject of dispute, I shall not think it necessary to dwell long upon it; whilst, again, in the selection of my examples I shall think myself at liberty to adopt those which may at the same time serve as illustrations to the general subject of which I am treating.

It has always been allowed by the common consent of Christians, (except so far as in recent times it may

have been retracted for interested purposes,) that the whole of God's revelation and will, as made known by Him through men to man, is to be found in the pages of the Bible. And there are, I most fully believe, the very strongest reasons to be rendered for this belief. Not only is it antecedently probable that in making use of the vehicle of writing at all for the conveyance of His words to men, a superintending Providence would ensure that the whole of them, at least all of them that were intended for the permanent benefit of mankind, should be thus securely deposited; but there is, further, the absence of all well-founded claim on the part of any traditionary doctrine to be considered as an original part of revelation, whilst in the contents themselves, as we are furnished with them, we never need find ourselves at a loss for any practical directions that we require. At the same time we must candidly acknowledge that the conclusion thus arrived at, and daily acted on by us, is one which falls far short of what can be called demonstration.

Regarding the New Testament in the light of a collection of different writings, most of them composed with some specific end in view, and addressed to particular communities or individuals, and neither in their several nor joint capacity making any direct claim to be regarded as embodying the whole substance of our faith, it will always be easy, for those who feel the inclination, to raise a doubt as to whether every important point of doctrine, after having been originally commu-

nicated by word of mouth, was afterwards consigned to Scripture. I will now, in turn, take my leave of this department of the subject, after first calling attention to the fact that one of the most remarkable of all the instances that serve to illustrate it is exhibited by that particular species of proof which at first sight seems to claim a signal exemption from it. I allude to the miraculous powers under cover of whose seal revelation was first imparted to man.

Antecedently indeed, as it must be acknowledged, there is no more improbability in a miracle than in the creation of the previous law of nature to which it forms the special exception. And though to us, separated as we are by this long interval of time from the apostolic age, the evidence for the particular miracles with which revelation was introduced into the world must necessarily be inferior in degree to that bestowed upon the age which witnessed them, still there can be no doubt that (besides the present substitution of other kinds of proof to us in their stead) quite enough remains to satisfy the mind of any impartial enquirer of the fact of their performance.

But leaving for the moment this point, and assuming the fact of the miracle to be proved beyond all possibility of doubt, yet still the question remains to be asked, What does it prove? What but a certain power external and superior to nature, but to the quality or character of which the miracle itself, *quâ* miracle, proves little? Scripture itself, be it remembered, as-

signs the power of working miracles to evil power as well as to good; and it seems to be only when, as sometimes has occurred, the two come into open conflict with each other, that we witness the direct and open triumph of the good power over the evil.

A miracle, then, regarding it simply in its character of miracle, proves little or nothing beyond the exertion of supernatural power; and to prove the quality of that power we must have recourse to certain tests, many of them external to the fact itself,—such as the moral, or doctrinal object for which it was worked, the general character of its worker, and so forth. And these may at times involve us in questions of considerable intricacy.

But, still further, let me call especial attention to the way in which all unnecessary evidence in support of the performance itself of the divine miracles appears to be purposely excluded from them at the very moment of their performance. Thus in some of the most striking instances we find a few persons selected as witnesses, to the exclusion of all the rest, who are thus left to gather it as they can from their more favoured companions. Or, again, let us take the instance of the very miracle which, of all, concerns us the most intimately, as the foundation of our highest hope, the resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ from the dead. In what terms is the attestation on behalf of this miracle described by St. Peter:—"Him God raised up the third day, and shewed Him openly; *not to all the people,* but unto witnesses chosen before of

God, even to us, who did eat and drink with Him after He rose from the dead." (Acts x. 40, 41.) What but the self-confidence of truth itself would have dared to express itself in such terms as these? With what quiet assurance does revelation here assert the dignity of her position, as though she almost disdained to make full use of the authority placed at her disposal! How consistent, again, is this original evidence for the fact of the miracle with the evidence of it as transmitted to us! Had the miracle itself been so attested as to place it beyond the possibility of a doubt to every individual of the age in which it was performed, it might seem that a corresponding record of it would have been required to transmit it in the same certainty from generation to generation of believers; or in default of this, a seeming excuse for unbelief would be held out to after generations which was denied to the first. As it is, the original witness to the miracle and the standing evidence of it, are in admirable consistency with each other: whilst both together serve in the highest possible degree to illustrate the point for which I have adduced them.

It only remains to point out the exact correlation which is found to exist between the particular character of the truths which revelation discovers to us, together with that of the evidence which supports them, on the one hand, and our own natural disposition towards the reception of both, under this character, on the other hand; viewing this latter not in the mistaken tendency of it already adverted to, into which a one-sided de-

velopment and exercise of our mental faculties is apt to hurry us, but viewing it as the gradual and legitimate result of the special training provided for us both in the ordinary course of our daily experience, and also in what eminently befits man in his most genuine character, of a being "of large discourse looking before and after," the study of past events, of those more especially in whose transaction a prominent part has been sustained by preceding generations of that race of which he is now in turn the living representative.

Revelation everywhere presupposes nature. Revelation builds upon the foundation which nature has previously laid, each in turn contributing their own appointed share in the united task of rearing aloft the edifice which is to serve at once as a school for our instruction and a temple for our worship.

Throughout the whole interval which separates our first entrance into the world from our final departure out of it, scarcely a day passes without imprinting some lesson or other on our minds, respecting the nature and value of what is called moral or probable evidence. We learn by slow degrees to adapt ourselves to what we find by experience will not adapt itself to us. We learn to repose our belief upon a less degree of proof than we should antecedently have felt disposed to demand. On the other hand, the self-same experience equally warns us not to be too hasty in tendering our assent to whatever comes forward with a fair show of claim upon it. We gradually acquire the habit of

gauging the kind and degree of evidence which is requisite in each case that comes before us, and with which we may and must rest satisfied. We learn, in short, to feel our way in life; to guess beforehand what is likely to afford a firm footing to our steps, and what is likely to give way beneath them. And as the result of this life-long accumulating experience, our belief or disbelief in things comes to be in pretty exact accordance with the things themselves. And this, too, in spite of our occasionally being obliged to draw our conclusions out of a mass of at first sight very confused and even discordant evidence. Nay, we at times find ourselves obliged to form our conclusions, and to act resolutely upon them, in the face of a certain amount of contrary evidence, which keeps its ground to the very last; and although we may feel convinced that a full information on the subject would enable us to remove it, yet, situated as we at present are, we are forced to content ourselves with the fact of its being outweighed by a preponderating amount of evidence in the scale opposed to it.

Again, we find ourselves compelled at times to accept a statement as true in the main, although some of its minor details are not only inexplicable, but actually proved to be incorrect. We can allow for the presence of a certain amount of such inaccuracies in a statement or narrative, without their at all invalidating its general veracity, providing of course this latter to be established on a reasonably secure basis. And in such a case, when

we are unable to discover the exact point at which the accurate merges into the inaccurate, we practically allow a margin or free-board for the confines of the two to meet in, and give ourselves no farther trouble about the question, in the full assurance that the incorrectness does not extend far enough to affect, what alone we are concerned with, the general substance.

Now I ask, why should not this daily training which we are receiving at the hands of God Himself,—for He it is who has placed us in the midst of these circumstances, and disposed us so to act under them,—why should not this process of training be a subordinate means to a still higher end than any to which this world can apply it? What is to hinder revelation from approaching us by the path which nature herself has (as if purposely) prepared for her to walk in? What is there in the contents of the messages which she delivers to us, or in the proofs with which she supports them, that we can object to without belying the instructions which we have been receiving all our life long? Does the evidence which she tenders us fall short of absolute demonstration? And has not our life been one continued lesson to us on the necessity of submitting to a reasonable degree of probable evidence alone? Are there some points in her statements which, in spite of a vastly preponderating evidence in favour of their correctness, still remain inexplicable? And has not our own experience taught us to anticipate this very case?

Further, does she on some trifling points of detail, quite irrelative to her main errand, exhibit a certain amount of inaccuracy? And have we not been repeatedly taught the little real importance which we are to attach to them? May they not even, for aught we know, have been purposely allowed a place in Scripture, in order to give us the best of all opportunities for the exercise of that *fairness* of judgment which, of all the many important results of our daily experience, is immeasurably the most important?

Take, then, we would say, the Bible into your hands, and examine it as you would examine any other books; only in doing so, never lose sight of the difference which separates it from, as well as the resemblance which connects it with them. And whilst applying to the full, within its legitimate sphere, the instrument with which your daily experience has combined with the study of past ages to provide you, the contents and evidences of Scripture, recollect that it is not by each separate detail taken successively so much as by the whole taken together that their actual character is to be determined. Let it, then, be your principal object to arrive at a well-proportioned view of the entire structure, and your principal caution to avoid dwelling so exclusively or so minutely on any one feature, as to allow it to fill up all the space in your attention, and to thrust all besides it into the background.

And, lastly, remember that revelation, though addressing herself, as she undoubtedly does, primarily

and consciously to our intellectual faculties, involves also a special address to all those higher instincts and cravings of our moral and spiritual nature which, equally with the former, claim an essential share in our constitution. It is in the very innermost chambers of the soul, with doors closed even against the presence of consciousness herself, that the cause of revelation has to be eventually pleaded and determined. And the result of a rejection thence is an immediate appeal on her part to a higher and infallible tribunal.

What a solemn responsibility is that which rests upon every human soul of pronouncing a decision which must itself in turn be distinctly confirmed or annulled in the courts of eternity.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF HUMAN MEDIA, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN 3. THE PRESERVATION, TRANSMISSION, AND INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE.

IT is partly our happiness and partly our misfortune that we become so habituated in process of time to the circumstances, whatever they may be, amongst which we find ourselves placed, as to cease at length to conceive the possibility of a change in their arrangement.

Whilst any the most trifling deviation from the accustomed routine arouses our immediate attention, we at the same time allow all the far more numerous and more important instances of undeviating conformity with it to pass by entirely unnoticed. Whilst, again, we seize with the greatest eagerness on whatever claims to be regarded as an exception to the ordinary laws of nature, we yet almost as uniformly fail to realize the operations of the laws themselves.

But now let us for a moment imagine, what in itself is equally conceivable with what experience proves to us to be actually the case, that nature, instead of presenting us with a continuous reproduction of forms cast in the same moulds, presented herself under the opposite character of a succession of distinct creative acts, resulting in forms each entirely dissimilar from and wholly disconnected with all which precede or follow it.

As regards our own nature in particular, let us

imagine that instead of being indebted as we are for our own introduction upon the stage of life to the instrumentality of those who preceded us, we each of us renewed in our own individual instance the example actually recorded in the case of our first parent, of a creation issuing fresh from the plastic hand of the Creator, in the full growth and free exercise of all its faculties.

Reverting again from this picture of the imagination to the still more wonderful scene which nature actually unfolds to our view, let us notice how each of all the endless varieties of life which are swarming around us, forms but the temporary embodiment of a permanent type which it has inherited from the representatives of the same type which have gone before it in the world, and which it bequeaths in turn to those that follow, generation succeeding to generation, like links of the same chain or pearls threaded upon the same string, and exhibiting together an unbroken continuity throughout each successive period in the world's history, from the first act of creation down to the present moment. And from surveying this principle as forming the basis of the whole of nature's operations, let us especially remark it as it stands exemplified in her noblest representative, man; and then let us ask ourselves whether it does not suggest the presence of a deep and pervading intercommunion between the men of one generation and those of another; not, indeed, to the exclusion of the separate existence and responsibility of each gene-

ration in turn, and of each individual which helps to compose it,—the latter a fact which consciousness and conscience, reason and revelation, are unanimous in attesting,—but consisting along with it.

Again, from tracing man through his successive generations, let us next survey him as at any given point of time he is found occupying the surface of the globe. And here, too, let us notice the infinite ways in which, by God's own appointed ordinance, man is made the instrument of help to his fellow men, each in turn constantly receiving from and imparting to all the rest. And why, we ask, should not the same Being who has ordained that man should be the especial medium for the distribution of every earthly blessing to his fellow men, avail himself of this earthly machinery for the conveyance of other and higher blessings?

The two great principles, then, of intercommunion and interdependence between man and man as forming the basis of man's life on earth, are obviously appropriate for the support of a still nobler structure. If man is at once the son of preceding generations and the father of generations which are to come, and the brother and companion of all who help to compose his own generation in the world, what is to forbid his acting a son's and a father's and a brother's part in a still higher capacity, by in turn receiving from, and in turn imparting to his fellow men the glad tidings of salvation?

I commenced a former chapter (iv.) by describing one or two trains of thought which might be naturally called up in our minds by the sight of a Bible. I endeavoured, amongst other things, to point out that the Bible has its points of resemblance to and connexion with other books as well as of difference from them. Throwing a woof across the threads which form the warp of the world's history, it binds them together into one compact texture. Lowering itself down into the history of this world, it in turn elevates the history of this world into that of the world above. I pointed out next (chap. v.) how the at first spoken and subsequently written form in which revelation has exhibited itself to man are each to be regarded as accidental features in her character; the essential feature indicated in common by both consisting in this, that God has chosen to make use of man as the channel of His gifts and revelations to his brother man.

I passed on thence (chap. vi.) to the highest exemplification of which this principle is possibly capable, as exhibited in the Incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, a doctrine which must be regarded as alone furnishing us with the true key-note to the contents of either Testament.

I then proceeded to shew how, at once in harmony with and in due subordination to this chief mystery, and at the same time raised immeasurably above the level to which man is capable of elevating himself by his own unassisted efforts, particular individuals were specially

called and endowed by God to be the dispensers of His truth to their brethren, as it were messengers passing to and fro upon the steps of the ladder which was seen at once set up on the earth and reaching to heaven. (Gen. xxviii. 12.)

Let me now call attention to one still remaining application of the same principle, at once again in harmony with and in still further subordination to those already specified.

Again, casting a glance over the endless array of machinery to which I have already in the beginning of this chapter alluded, as forming the ordinary exemplification of the principle of God's dealing with men, let us next proceed to remark how it all spontaneously puts itself into motion as though constructed for the very purpose of filling up the remaining isolation in which the Bible is still apparently left, by bringing its contents home to every individual of each generation in succession upon earth; a machinery which, as employed for this purpose, we will, to avoid any unnecessary dispute as to the exact extent to which it is available, simply characterize by the general name of the Church.

The copy of the English version of the Bible to which I have had more than once occasion to refer, was printed in the year 1835, and was itself of course the reproduction of a printed copy existing before it. In the same way its origin is capable of being traced still further back through a series of printed impressions, each and all forming an illustration, not the less real or

significant because too ordinary to be commonly recognised, of the employment of human agency in the work of transmitting the Scriptures from generation to generation of mankind. After thus tracing it back for upwards of two centuries, we suddenly lose sight of the Bible under this form. And we learn on enquiry that it was then translated into English (not, indeed, wholly for the first time) out of the Hebrew and Greek languages, in which it was originally composed.

Here, then, at any rate we have an example which no one will be bold enough to dispute, of the employment of the same agency, no longer upon what may be termed a mere piece of mechanical drudgery in the service of Scripture, but on a task the due performance of which calls into exercise some of the very highest qualities of our nature, both intellectual and moral. Starting again on our backward course from the point which we have last gained, we may in fancy pursue the series of manuscripts for which we again stand indebted, as in the first instance, to the mechanical employment at least of human agency in the cause of revelation, till at length we arrive at the termination of our research in the original manuscripts of the inspired writers themselves.

But we are as yet far from exhausting the stock of illustrations which this department of our subject provides for us. Not only is the constant exertion of human agency required in order to the preservation, transmission, and diffusion of the Scriptures amongst the

individuals composing each successive generation, but there is, if possible, a still louder demand for the same agency in order to the recognition by the one of the events and doctrines enshrined in the other. Place a Bible in the hands of a child, and it is to him no more than another book, just as all books are to him no more than so many collections of signs without any meaning. He has to learn, by a tedious process of instruction at the hand of others, what is the precise signification attached to every such arbitrary sign, whether addressed to the eye or to the ear. He has to enter into the meaning of many of the various combinations of which these signs are susceptible, not only before he can read a single verse of the Bible for himself, but before he can attach the slightest meaning to it when read to him.

Again, the Bible is constantly found referring to subjects respecting which no information whatever is to be found in its own pages, but which it presupposes us to have gathered from various sources external to itself.

And not only does it presuppose an acquaintance on our part with the ordinary course of nature around us, and the ordinary incidents of daily life, both of which we may, in part at least, be supposed capable of noticing each one for himself, independently of any assistance derived from others; but in order to anything like a full comprehension, at least, of its contents, the Bible presupposes a considerable acquaintance with different portions of the history of the human race,

especially those which have successively come into contact, or stood in any kind of relation, with the favoured race which was for ages the principal scene and depositary of revelation. In short, the Book implies an acquaintance more or less intimate with other books, themselves each an eminent instance of the degree in which man may become the instrument for imparting knowledge to his brother men. Whilst in special cases, as in those at present referred to, the knowledge thus preserved and imparted, over and above its immediate use, becomes subservient to the very highest possible ends.

I have already, in the course of the foregoing pages, called attention to the unsystematic character of the contents of a great portion of the Bible, especially the New Testament. Addressed as it in great part was to those who had been just previously put into possession of the main substance of revelation by the oral teaching of the apostles or their appointed delegates, much of the New Testament appears consequently in the light rather of a supplement than in that of an introduction to the divine mysteries.

As I have again already remarked, this peculiarity of its form in no way detracts from its actual position as the sole source and standard of our belief. In proportion as the oral deposits by which the written Word was preceded or accompanied began to fade away, or to be mixed up with human corruptions, the more permanent, and in their collective if not individual capa-

city all-sufficient, embodiments of divine truth stepped into their place. At the same time, it must be allowed that this new position, early assumed and ever since maintained by Scripture, has not relieved it of the unsystematic character which the circumstances of its composition originally imposed upon it; as a consequence of which, we find Scripture herself, in turn, requiring to be supplied with a supplement, or rather an introduction, to her contents; such as is foreseen and provided for in the ministration of the Word, and the religious instruction imparted by parents and teachers; drawn indeed in each case ultimately from herself, and with an appeal always lying open to herself again for the test of its correctness, but still in outward form and arrangement exhibiting a considerable departure from her own method and arrangement; displaying, in short, an unconscious attempt at the reproduction, out of the contents of Scripture, of the very oral deposit whose existence was originally presupposed by them. And in this, perhaps, more than in any instance which I have adduced, we have a proof of the vast extent to which the employment of even ordinary human agency is had recourse to in the service of revelation.

And this introduces a somewhat fresh subject to our notice. We cannot look around us upon the various Christian communities of the present day, each of which professes to ground its belief on the same Scriptural basis, without being struck by the great amount and variety of creeds, and articles, and professions of faith

with which each is enriched or encumbered. In truth, the wide dissimilarity which is observable between them is a most melancholy instance of the perversion of that principle, whose very usefulness renders it all the more open to abuse in the hands of a corrupted nature.

But putting aside this question of difference between them, and confining our attention simply to the vast amount of doctrinal statements accumulated in each Christian community, let us enquire how far this dogmatic tendency, considered in itself, is to be regarded in the light of a use or abuse of the principle of human agency as employed in the service of revelation.

The remarks above made on the peculiar structure and contents of the Bible will, I think, suffice to establish the necessity of providing the young and simple, at least, in every generation of the Church, with some brief formulæ, which may serve at once as an introduction to and summary of revelation, as well as a channel for the open profession of Christian faith; and such, in fact, we find ourselves provided with in the Apostles' Creed, in all probability the first result of this very demand. We find another instance to the same purpose in some of the shorter and simpler catechisms in use amongst Christians.

But this is very far indeed from accounting for the prolix statements and minute details exhibited in most confessions of faith at the present day. And we may, I think, notice two especial and very different points of view from which these later appendages to the

primitive forms of belief may be, and indeed actually are, regarded.

1. They are most commonly looked upon as so many outworks successively thrown up in defence of those particular points of Christian doctrine which have been at some time made the especial objects of attack, either by traitors within the camp, or by foes without. And the maintenance of these posts of defence, even long after the attacks themselves upon them have ceased, is commonly sought to be justified by the fact of the continued existence of the same corrupt tendencies in man's nature which first prompted the attacks, and to which the withdrawal of the defence would appear as an invitation to renew them. And regarded in this light, there can, I think, be no question that within certain limits the precaution is a perfectly reasonable one.

2. But it is also not uncommon to represent the growth of creeds, and dogmatic formulæ in general, as the spontaneous result of a healthy and vigorous condition in the life of the Church, and as conducing to an ever-deepening insight into the nature of the divine mysteries. I confess that I can see no ground whatever for so regarding it. On the contrary, I am firmly convinced that the tendency to dogmatize is a sure sign of decay in the real life of the Church, which thus seeks vainly to replace in the letter what it has ceased to realize in the spirit. It seems to exhibit all the combined temerity and ignorance of an inferior artist,

who should presume to fill up the sketch of a master-hand with a colour and finishing of his own.

In the first age of her faith, and hope, and love, the Church stood in need, as we have seen, of only the very simplest formulæ with which to invest her belief. Her simple creed formed a kind of central nucleus, around which all else spontaneously and almost unconsciously clustered. All minuteness of conception was absorbed in the ecstacy of devotion. It was in proportion as her faith, from expanding itself over the whole length and breadth of revelation, began gradually to retire within a narrow and ever-narrowing circle, that the intellect came forward to secure the objects of its belief from being totally lost by recording a minute description of them.

Or to borrow from another image, in the spiritual fervour of the early Christians the details of their belief were held suspended, to a great degree, in a state of solution; but as the warmth died away, they were seen to successively deposit themselves in the shape of solid and sharply defined crystals. And if ever the first fervour and faith of the primitive age is revived amongst us, the first sign of its re-appearance will be the gradual re-sublimation of these very deposits, on which we have long learned to look with such fond admiration.

At the same time, whilst admitting, as I think we needs must do, the dogmatic tendency to be in itself a mark of declension from the original warmth and

simplicity of Christian faith, it does not follow that by hastily repudiating the use of formulæ in our belief we shall be taking the best steps towards regaining what we have lost.

Deeply as their existence amongst us may prove us to be degenerate from our forefathers in the same faith, the use of them, within at least certain limits, may still be requisite in order to prevent the little resemblance which we retain from being entirely forfeited. They may be necessary to prevent that total erasure of divine truths from the mind, which has already, in too great measure, befallen the spirit. In fact, by rejecting the main formulæ in which the doctrines of our faith are at present enshrined, we may, so far from taking a step in the right direction, be throwing away our last chance, humanly speaking, of ever recovering these doctrines in their genuine simplicity.

Dogmata may be to us what ceremonies and ordinances were to the Jews, not in themselves spiritual, but for that very reason a means to them for appropriating the spirit, which under any purer form they were incapable of realizing. Let us remember that it is by an increased cultivation of the spirit, not by a hasty rejection of the letter, that we can ever hope to regain that true proportion of both which was enjoyed by those who, however far they may have fallen short of us in point of intellectual attainments, have still further transcended us in the possession of qualities of a far nobler order.

It is not, indeed, to be denied that between the simple faith of primitive Christianity and the latitudinarianism of the present age, there appears at first sight a striking resemblance. Both shew themselves alike independent of the numerous formulæ which are seen to encumber, even whilst they protect, the believers of the present as they have done those of many preceding generations. But it may be well questioned whether this superficial resemblance does not cover a still wider amount of difference between them. That freedom from the letter which in the one is merely used to signify the entire absorption into the spirit, is in the other too often used to signify nothing but an equal indifference to both.

In bringing this subject to a close, let me just advert again to the main purpose for which I adduced it, which was to shew that creeds, and formularies, and articles of faith are in their proper degree (to be estimated in part by the erroneous tendencies of our nature, and in part by the prevailing spirit of each successive age) to be regarded as instances of the employment of human agency in the work of interpreting the contents of the written Word to every believer of all the generations which succeed one another in the Church of Christ upon earth.

It only remains to notice (by way of summing up the results at which we have now arrived) the manner in which, owing to the uniform and consistent application of the one sole principle first alluded to, exemplified in

every form, from the very highest to the very lowest, of which it is capable, the whole of the apparent isolation in which (as I began my remarks on this subject with noticing) the Bible is placed, entirely disappears from around it, exhibiting in its stead a tissue of the finest yet firmest connexion between the written depositary of revelation on the one hand, and each faculty of every believer on the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FUTURE RETROSPECT.

REVELATION suggests a comparison of itself to each in turn of two opposite standards. One of these is supplied to us in the ignorance, however varying within a certain range, of divine truth which man has uniformly displayed when left to find his way by the help of his unaided reason and instincts, or by the light of a false or perverted system of tradition. And this, as it is the commonest, so it is in general the most instructive standard of comparison for us to resort to in order to form a due estimate of the brightness and clearness of that light which opens upon us in the pages of Scripture. We measure it by the state of darkness which preceded it, and which still lies brooding on all sides around it.

And this, as it is the most practical way of estimating the true character of revelation, so it is the way in which it is in general estimated by Scripture itself. And regarded in this sole aspect, revelation appears perfect and complete even as at present accorded to us. In the passage into light from darkness we do not stop to measure the exact intensity of the light for which we have exchanged the darkness. But it must be allowed that there is also another side from which to approach the subject, another and opposite standard of

comparison by which to try it, and one too which has its distinct sanction in Scripture itself no less than in facts and reason.

The Bible often reminds us of the temporary and subordinate character of the position in which we at present find ourselves. Nor does it profess to reveal to us during this our present stage of existence everything that actually is, but only such things as are necessary or useful for us to know, and in the form under which alone we can for the present know them.

It shines like the sun when, before it is as yet fully risen, it first begins to break up the horizon into its distinct outlines, or as it first flashes upon the mountain-tops, rather than when from its noontide height it bathes the whole landscape in its glory.

Viewed, then, in this aspect, revelation assumes in turn a somewhat fresh character; whilst, again, man himself is no longer regarded simply as emerging from darkness into light, but as under a course of guidance from one degree of light towards another, as passing from the first faint streaks of dawn to the open sunshine of the day.

Are we, then, in so representing revelation, at all endeavouring to depreciate her real value? God forbid. We are, on the contrary, calling attention to one of the very points in which to us, situated as we find ourselves, her value chiefly consists. In the presence of that light in which we shall one day walk, we should, as yet, become totally blinded; and God, therefore, in

His mercy, has attempered it to our present powers of vision. We enjoy as much, and as much only of it, as we can bear.

And in this adaptation of Divine truth to our own faculties during their present state of imperfect development, we discern one of the many tokens of its proceeding from the same almighty Power to whom we ourselves stand indebted for our existence, and who, through it, is gradually preparing us for our final introduction into His own immediate presence; whilst we, at the same time, find ourselves provided with a full and satisfactory answer to many of the common objections to revelation, based as they are on the assumption that in order to support its character it must be absolutely complete and perfect in itself; whereas, to be of the least practical benefit, it must plainly adapt itself, in a certain measure, to the imperfect creatures who are to use it.

And further, the view of revelation here afforded may well serve as a hint to all who at any time take upon themselves the office of her defenders, not to outstep in their zeal for the truth the limits of the truth itself, lest, after advancing on their own responsibility beyond them, they find themselves, in turn, obliged to retreat, and so bring down upon revelation as well as upon themselves the appearance of discomfiture.

Instead, then, of expending our efforts on the vain attempt to prove the absolute and perfect agreement of revelation with the whole range of objective existence, let us rather confine ourselves to the more hopeful and

practicable object of shewing how it furnishes us with exactly what we require. Let us point out, for instance, how each successive portion of Scripture, besides conforming itself to the particular race and generation to which it was immediately addressed, has never since ceased to speak to all races and generations of the world, of which this one was the temporary representative.

Again, regarding the Bible as we indeed commonly and most usefully regard it, not in the light of a succession of books composed at different times, and for different immediate objects, but as the one Word of God, addressing itself at once to our own very selves; let us shew how in this point of view also it is in thorough harmony with all around it, and in exact correlation with ourselves. How, for instance, even the unsystematic character which more or less pervades its contents, is in perfect keeping with the kind of instruction provided for us by nature. How, again, it supplies us with enough, though for the purpose of our own probation not more than enough, to satisfy all the conditions which our intellectual faculties can fairly impose on it; whilst under the operation of these latter, all its scattered rays are gathered into a focus depicting the Divine image upon our souls, and at the same time kindling it into warmth and life. Let us point out the manner in which, besides answering the direct claims of reason, it also fits into all the intricacies and unlocks all the deepest recesses of our hearts, at once

sustaining, and purifying, and elevating all our noblest instincts and highest aspirations; the entire structure and framework of our nature, finding thus its exact complement and correlation in God's truth as revealed to us in Scripture, whilst from the Divine blessing bestowed upon their union, those noble specimens of our nature are seen to issue which more forcibly than the clearest arguments prove to the world what man's destination really is, and what, by consequence, that system must be which alone can pretend to exhibit him in this his true character.

And in thus upholding its divine source and authority, let us at the same time be always free to confess, nay, rather let us glory in the confession, that Scripture provides us with only a temporary manifestation of divine things, to be itself in turn succeeded and absorbed by another and far higher one, when from seeing through a glass darkly we shall see face to face, and when from knowing in part we shall know even as we are known.

Meanwhile, it may somewhat help us to realize the position which we at present occupy, if we endeavour to project ourselves for a while in thought to that future standing-point from which we shall one day regard it, when in the place of the distant and indistinct glimpses which we are at present enabled to catch of the promised land of our inheritance, we shall find it assigned to us in full and perpetual possession and enjoyment. Then, indeed, though not till then, will our eyes become opened to a full perception of our present igno-

rance. Creation in all its boundless expanse, past as well as present, will unfold itself before us. We shall discern the purpose at which we can as yet but faintly guess, of all those countless systems of worlds which throng the infinity of space on every side of us; we shall peruse the records of our own native globe through all the successive stages of its existence, from the first day of its creation to that of its final destruction, or rather, perhaps, its transition under a still mightier change than any which has as yet befallen it, into a state of still higher dignity than that to which it was advanced when it first became the abode of man. Then also, for the first time, all the history of our own race will unveil itself to our view. Not only will the lost memorials re-appear of ages and generations long since faded away, but we shall read all, both new and old, in a clearer and truer light than we can at present hope to impart to them by the most laborious and patient investigation. We shall detect every motive, which as yet we can but imperfectly surmise, by which every action of which this world has been at any time the scene, was secretly prompted. We shall discern the exact relation in which, age after age, mankind has stood towards his Creator. We shall follow the hidden strivings of the divine Spirit with the spirit of man, and measure the exact degree in which they have been, in each instance, followed by him or rejected. And then, too, we shall see, each of us, down into the very depths of our own mind and heart; we shall recognise the workings within us of all that nicely adjusted,

highly complicated machinery, which at present seems to us to move almost more in compliance with instinctive impulse, than in obedience to the mandate of conscious will and reason.

We shall perceive how the same Almighty power that first formed us and endowed us each with a will and a power of our own for which to be directly responsible, and launched us one by one upon the eternity of existence, never for a moment discontinued to offer Himself as our guide and companion by the way.

We shall feel the full importance of everything that has ever happened to us, that is to say, of everything which is now day by day and hour by hour in course of happening to us, and of which, unhappily for ourselves, we take at the time so little account. We shall have measured out to us the precise force of each temptation that has ever assailed us, and the precise degree in which it was either favoured or resisted on our part. We shall discover all those windings and turning-points in our life of which we at present so often form such a mistaken estimate. We shall trace the exact manner in which, out of the mutual action of ourselves and our circumstances, we grew up year by year into what we at this present moment are, and into what we shall have then become, each of us a distinct world in itself, with its own separate history traced in all its minutest details, upon the successive strata of our existence.

We shall find out also how we have each of us lived

to others as well as to ourselves: we shall discern the exact amount of good and of evil seed which during our own progress through life we have scattered in such profusion around us, and the exact amount of good and evil fruit which it has gone on producing amongst generation after generation of those who succeeded us on the earth.

We shall trace the gradual unfolding of our own reasoning powers, and the proportionate substitution of them in the place of reliance on the authority of others. We shall learn whether, by our employment of these powers in the service of truth, we went on steadily progressing from one degree of light to another; or if, from that spirit of pride which rests contented with nothing short of a belief of its own creating, we abandoned the true light of heaven to walk by the brightness of our own fire, and the sparks which we ourselves kindled. We shall find ourselves confronted with the full light of day, as it bursts upon us in all its freshness, no longer to cheer and guide us, but to dazzle and confound us with its glory.

And then, too, from this same standing-point, we shall first form a full and fair estimate of all the successive revelations which "at sundry times and in divers manners (πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως) God spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets," as well as that last and fullest revelation which "He spake unto us by His Son;" we shall view it as it contrasts itself at once with all the miserable attempts which man has ever made at self-illumination on the one hand, and

the free and glorious manifestation of the divine Presence itself on the other.

Meanwhile, until the actual arrival of that day when all that is as yet dark will be made clear, let us learn to wait in patience for the final solution of many difficulties with which we may at present find ourselves surrounded. Let us advance steadily onwards by the light which is already given to us, in the full assurance that a still brighter and clearer light is in store for us. And if in the course of our progress we meet with any who would persuade us that the light by which we are walking is insufficient for us, or the ground on which we are treading insecure, let us always be ready to give to such a reason of the hope that is within us to the full extent of our ability. Or if we find this task too hard for us, still do not let us be disconcerted. Provided only we lay open our whole heart and mind to the sincere reception of truth, we may, so far as ourselves at least are concerned, rest perfectly satisfied with the conviction which we feel springing up spontaneously within us, even though we may be unable to express it in clear and positive statements to others. Let it, in such a case, suffice us to live upon the daily food of that hidden manna[a] with which God has in His mercy been pleased to supply our daily wants; let us treasure up that earnest of the Spirit in our hearts, that deep sense of harmony between it and our own spirits, which is the natural result of a surrender of ourselves to God as revealed to us in the Person of His own Son; and in

[a] Rev. ii. 17.

the full strength of this assurance, let us give in our appeal to the last great day from those courts of shallow criticism whose decisions, when they themselves shall come in turn to be sifted, will remain a laughing-stock and a wonder to eternity.

And, in conclusion, let us always remember that we are never in reality abandoned to ourselves even in our moments of apparently greatest desolation. We have within us the ever-abiding presence of God Himself, at once the object and stay of all our highest faculties and affections. Futurity will in this respect but disclose to us in full what has already begun at least to exist. Already we are put into partial possession of what will then be made ours wholly and for ever. True, we are as yet deficient in the absolute knowledge that we already in part possess it. At the same time, this deficiency does not make the reality of our possession less. Beloved, now are we the sons of God as truly, if not as fully, now as when hereafter we shall be like Him and see Him as He is. Christ is our life here as truly, if not as fully, as when hereafter we shall appear with Him in glory.

"Who, then, is there among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of His servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon His God[b]."

[b] Isaiah l. 10.

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